Chernobyl: A Culture Of Cronyism, Laziness, And A Deep-Seated Indifference Toward The General Population

It is certainly true that Chernobyl, while an accident in the sense that no one intentionally set it off, was also the deliberate consequence of “a culture of cronyism, laziness, and a deep-seated indifference toward the general population.”(source 3, page Xi) On 26th April 1986, the largest technological disaster of the twentieth century happened at Unit Four of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in the Soviet Union; in current Ukraine. The wave of highly compressed air lifted the cover off of one of the power station’s nuclear reactors, Reactor Number Four, accompanied by another immense explosion that left the reactor’s core unprotected and ”spewing radioactive material” (source 3) Not only would it be the initial atomic power plant, but it was also a new sector for the Ministry of Energy and Electrification, which had never before experienced constructing a nuclear station from beginning to end. The ”RBMK, for reaktor bolshoy moschnosti kanalnyy” (source 1, page 12), was a mighty achievement of Soviet gigantomania and it was twenty times larger in proportion to the Western reactors. It had the ability to produce ”1,000 megawatts of electricity, enough to keep the lights on for half the population of Kyiv.”(source 1, page 61) The Cold War is evident as the Soviet Union’s desire to be more promising than those in the West, especially America, can be observed through the decision made by the country’s secretive nuclear bureaucracy, the Ministry of Medium Machine Building; also known as Sredmash. They decided to disregard the prototype stage entirely because they believed that ”the quickest way to find out how the new reactors would work in industrial electricity generation would be to put them directly into mass production.” (source 1, page 63) Furthermore, the USSR was relatively backward in evolving computer technology and “lacked simulators with which to train its nuclear engineers, so the young engineers’ work at Chernobyl would be their first practical experience in atomic power.” (source 1, page 17) Therefore, during critical moments, because of their lack of professionalism and unreliable technology, the engineers were not capable of reading their instruments but were obliged to estimate the levels of activity in the core using their personal intuition. However, when the accident created an apocalyptic scenery, the Soviet officials officially recognised nothing for almost three days. The information acquired was still exiguous and incompatible because the armed forces said one aspect, scientists another. Regardless of their evidence, the Soviet bureaucrats wanted to cover up the irradiated city of Chernobyl.

The Chernobyl nuclear power plant is located near Pripyat where the workers lived with their families and had access to various facilities which offered citizens a high standard of living. According to Soviet planning legislation, ”Pripyat was separated from the plant itself by a ”sanitary zone” in which building was prohibited” (source 1, page 11) to guarantee that the population’s health will not be exposed to fields of low-level ionizing radiation. In January 1986, the Ukrainian minister of energy and electrification, Vitali Sklyarov, convinced the readers in an interview that the likelihood of a meltdown at the plant was “one in 10,000 years.” (source 1, page 74) The Soviet officials were so confident with their new performance that the director of the plant, Victor Brukhanov, had permitted his workers to skip the rundown unit in order to meet their end-of-year deadline which was a crucial security aspect of Reactor Number Four. Moreover, the test was supposed to have been verified before the reactor was authorised for usage in December 1983. However, by the beginning of 1886, the trial was more than two years delayed but with some modern adaptations, the reactor was finally able to activate. By midnight

on the 25th of April in Unit Control Room Number Four, a group of electrical engineers were ready to monitor the test after they were threatened with their contracts' cancellation if the examination did not occur soon. However, the defective reactor design was further worsened when it was operated by inadequately trained personnel. "The operators had resumed the reactor's long, controlled power descent and now held it steady at 720 megawatts—just above the minimum level required to perform the test." (source 1, page 80) However, the deputy chief engineer for operators, Anatoly Dyatlov assumed that a lower energy degree would be steadier and was determined to conduct the reactor at a level of 200 megawatts. At such a low level, other men knew that the reactor could be dangerously hazardous and even much more difficult to regulate than usual. Then, at twenty-eight minutes past midnight, a senior engineer called Leonid Toptunov, made a mistake because he omitted a step and watched how the reactor was "slipping away from him" (source 1, page 81).

With Chernobyl's nuclear radiation pouring down, Communist party bureaucrats dithered, impeded and hid the reality "to prevent the spread of panic-mongering, provocative rumours, and other negative manifestations." (source 1, page 70) Additionally, in Pripyat, the telephone lines were cut off to avoid the spreading of interpretations regarding the disastrous situation. The most influential man who was the general secretary of the Communist Party of the USSR, Mikhail Gorbachev, was awakened at around 5:00 a.m. on 26th April to be notified of the life-and-death dilemma at the plant. "In the first hours and even the first day after the accident, there was no understanding that the reactor had exploded and that there had been a huge nuclear emission into the atmosphere" is what Gorbachev recalled some time later after the incident. (history.com)

On Saturday, 26th April, after instruments at the Kyiv Institute of Botany reported an intense growth in radiation, KGB (the main security agency for the USSR) officers arrived and sealed the equipment to avoid the diffuse of information. By the time Gorbachev prepared an emergency conference to examine what had happened, other men present realised that radiation would shortly be distinguished far behind the perimeters of the USSR. During their encounter, the men needed to agree on what—or whether—to inform the Soviet population about the casualty. Just a month earlier, the USSR introduced glasnost which up until then had been nothing more than a slogan. Therefore, it is true to say that the Chernobyl explosion was an unpredictable test of the recent openness and transparent government that Gorbachev guaranteed the Party. However, the ancestral reflexes of secrecy and paranoia were profoundly rooted in the nation and the validity about accidents of any sort that might sabotage Soviet dignity or arouse a panicked atmosphere among the public had invariably been concealed like it never happened. However, on Tuesday, 29th April, "the papers were in no doubt from the reports coming in from their diplomatic correspondent[…]that, some days before, an accident of an appealing nature had happened." Furthermore, the scientists in Sweden had discovered a radioactive reaction in their territory and delineated it to the region surrounding Kiev in the USSR. The Swedish commanders were infuriated at the inadequacy of cautioning from the Soviets because "the Soviet authorities assured the Swedes that they had no information about any kind of nuclear accident within the USSR." Eventually, at 8.00 p.m. on Monday, 28th April, practically three days after the accident, "Radio Moscow broadcast the TASS statement agreed upon in Gorbachev's office." (source 1, page 175) Additionally, on TV news, the same statement was announced but there were no images inserted because they were striving to protect USSR's reputation. Furthermore, daily papers in Kyiv broadcasted the news, but their journalists tried their best to maintain it subtle in order to not attract the readers' attention: "Pravada Ukrainy printed a short report at the bottom of page three, beneath an article

recounting the story of two pensioners.” (source 1, page 175)

Meanwhile, the Soviet officials were continuously struggling to suppress the “Western rumours” (source 1, page 179) and the KGB chief Chebeikov assisted and informed his commanders that he was combatting the “bourgeois conspiracy” at its origin. He was attempting “methods to control the activities of foreign diplomats and correspondents, limit their ability to gather information on the accident”. (source 1, page 179) The Soviet government was still convincing the nation that the hazard provoked by the plant was confined to the thirty-kilometre area but the population “recognised the state’s reassuring official statements as hollow propaganda.” (source 1, page 211) On Sunday, 11th May, Moscow Central TV publicized its prime announcement from within the thirty-kilometre zone, “including footage of masked policemen stopping traffic at roadblocks, deserted houses, and a well-sealed with plastic.” (source 1, page 215) They persuaded the viewers that the situation was moderately calm as there was no smoke or glowing spots apparent. “What was predicted by the world—and particularly by the bourgeois newspapers in the West, which shouted from the rooftops that an enormous catastrophe was imminent—is no longer a threat. We are firmly convinced the danger has passed.” was their statement made on TV. Notwithstanding the report, in secret sessions, the Politburo knew that the direct consequence of the incident on the citizens of the USSR was already surpassing dismaying altitudes. Furthermore, on Wednesday, 14th May, more than two and a half weeks after the fulmination, Gorbachev appeared on TV to give a speech about Unit Four to the region for the first time which persisted for twenty-six minutes. He contradicted against the “mountain of lies” (source 1) notified by America and its NATO allies regarding the accident, which he described as a “vile campaign to distract attention from their failure to engage with his recent proposals for nuclear disarmament.” (source 1) Even though the Soviet officials were constantly persuading the population that the plant is under control further secrecies were evolving in order to maintain their prestige. The Ukrainian health minister received a telegram from his commander in Moscow in which he was instructed on how to register diagnoses on patients jeopardised by radiation. “While those with severe radiation sickness and burns we’re to be described accordingly—“acute radiation sickness from cumulative radiation exposure”—the records of those with lower exposure and without severe symptoms were not to mention radioactivity at all.” (source 1, page 253) Instead, the doctors had to state in these patients’ hospital files that they had been identified with “vegetative-vascular dystonia” which was accompanied by perspiring, rapid heart pulsations, nausea, and convulsions.

On 3rd July, at exactly 11 a.m., the Politburo had a meeting in which General Secretary Gorbachev opened the session and questioned the senior unit control engineer at Unit Four, Boris Scherbina, to cite his government commission’s ultimate document on the motives of the casualty. “The accident was the result of severe violations of the maintenance schedule by the operating staff and also of serious design flaws in the reactor[…]But these causes are not on the same scale. The commission believes that the thing that triggered the accident was mistakes by the operating personnel.” (source 1, page 270) This was the summary to which the Sredmash inclined more towards because they wanted to cover-up the failings of the reactor and that it was not up to the modern safety criteria. Furthermore, the truth was confronted when Gorbachev found out that the nuclear experts, Anatoly Aleksandrov and Efim Slavsky, knew about the internal issues within the Chernobyl nuclear power plant for thirty years and had nevertheless asserted on continually expanding the nuclear power program. However, Soviet officials decided to not reveal worldwide the factual origins of the disaster—“the design of the reactor itself; the systematic, long-term failures and the culture of secrecy and denial of the

Soviet nuclear program; and the arrogance of the senior scientists overseeing it's implementations" (source 1, page 272) because this was in their eyes an absurd action. Therefore, the use of scapegoats was further utilised as traditionally and the trial of Brukhanov and another five men who were condemned of provoking the accident at the Chernobyl Atomic Energy Station proceeded on 7th July 1987. Two years later, the Soviet engineer Grigory Medvedev publicised an incredible revelation of Chernobyl in a newspaper called 'Noir Mir'. However, it took him so long to publish it because he had to combat "a clandestine battle against the KGB and Chernobyl censorship commission organised specifically to keep the most sensitive information about the accident from the public." (source 1)

On the final weekend in April, a cloud containing radioactive material traversed across Scandinavia. However, the calamity did not spread through the headlines all at once, as crises commonly did in the Western world due to a lack of evidence. The information acquired by those in the West was gradually improving but the whole situation acted as a jigsaw that had to be pieced together. On Tuesday, 29th April 1986, the international papers began to deliver awarenesses of the accident at Chernobyl to their countries. The Financial Times published the official and laconic statement made by the Soviet news agency, TASS, that there had been an explosion at the plant: "Serious accident hits nuclear power plant in Soviet Union." (source 2) In addition, it also included a map of northern Europe which revealed the nuclear location and recited comments from Swedish commanders insulted at the absence of warning from Soviet officials. The Guardian stated: "Radioactive Russian dust cloud escapes" (source 2) and provided a summary of certainties about other nuclear disasters as well as a description of the categories of radioisotope released and their consequences on the human body. Many other popular presses within Britain shared their viewpoints of the incident, such as The Star which published "Atom cloud horror" and The Mirror that said "Russia's cloud of death". (source 2) "Perhaps a hint of Schadenfreude crept into the report of "An American nuclear safety expert" who had said that "the leak made Three Mile Island look like a tea-party." (source 2) Due to the inadequacy of information from the USSR, the papers were causing an uproar, shock, and cynicism among the populations. Therefore, the Financial Times headed "When total publicity served only to alarm and confuse" (source 2) through which they wanted to show the impacts of contradicting declarations upon people. From Washington, the papers publicised the American tension rested upon the Soviets to divulge all knowledge they had available. The American newspapers also discussed the creation of an impact between the Eastern European countries and the USSR regarding their alliance. Here they referred to not only the drifting of radioactivity but to how the incident which occurred would shortly affect the exports of electric power from the USSR to these countries because they would not be trusted anymore. On Thursday, 1st May, numerous papers reported the news broadcasted on Soviet TV which indicated that the reactor was under control. However, there was still no comment from high Soviet authority and therefore, Gorbachev's triumphs in international public relations were slowly but surely obliterating due to his use of propaganda. The former Swedish diplomat Hans Blix, and the American Morris Rosen, director of nuclear safety—had been given permission to see the plant face to face and become the primary officials from beyond the USSR to explore the scene. On Thursday at dawn, 8th May, the two men embarked from Moscow for their visit at Chernobyl. When they were steadily closer to the plant, "Rosen[…]asked Velikhov what range he should set on his dosimeter. About a hundred. Milliroentgen? No. Roentgen." (source 2) Nevertheless, Rosen's device was not manufactured for such a high radiation exposure but he was guaranteed that the situation was highly controlled by experienced personnel. Resultantly,"At a press conference in Moscow the following day, Rosen told reporters that the graphite fire was out and that measurements taken during their helicopter flight revealed that "there is relatively

little radioactivity now.[…]I can say that a competent—a very competent—group of Soviet experts is working on the site.” (source 1, page 215) On 7th July 1987 when the trial of the six defendants was happening, several representatives of the international media, involving correspondents from BBC radio and Japanese TV, were requested to attend “but would be brought in by bus to witness only the opening and closing of the proceedings, in which nothing but scripted statements would be read.” (source 1) in order to not divulge more than intended to their worldwide audience.